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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000388

SIPDIS

AF/C FR LISA KORTE

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TAGS: PGOV PREL GB

SUBJECT: GABON: PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS IN FULL SWING; ALI BONGO RELINQUISHES DEFENSE PORTFOLIO

Classified By: Political Officer Christopher Gunning for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Gabon's two week presidential campaign period officially started August 15 with launch rallies held by most, if not all, 23 candidates in Libreville. Also on the eve of the campaign Bongo stepped down as Defense Minister. Quickly establishing himself as the spending forerunner, ruling PDG candidate Ali Bongo Ondimba's billboards went up overnight on August 14 and his rally which focused on the younger generation he represents attracted several thousand. According to Foreign Minister and Ali Bongo campaigner Paul Tongui, Bongo faces the most difficult political challenge in three of Gabon's nine provinces. In her national day and campaign speeches, Interim President Rose Rogombe exhorted Gabonese to avoid "artificial tensions" and to exercise their democratic rights and duties without violence. After a delay, the Ministry of the Interior declared on August 18 that 813,164 Gabonese are registered to vote in the upcoming election. END SUMMARY.

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CANDIDATES RUNNING AT THE START OF THE GUN  
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¶2. (U) Within hours overnight, hundreds of campaign billboards went up around Libreville and other major cities. Most proclaimed the campaign slogans of ruling Democratic Party of Gabon (PDG) candidate Ali Bongo Ondimba. It was difficult to move around Libreville on August 15 without running into a campaign event. Some candidates chose to launch their campaigns in working class quarters among supporters. Bongo's posters were less prevalent in the more populist quarters of Charbonage and Nzeng-Ayong where posters for Maganga Moussavou, Zacharie Myboto and Andre Mba Obame were more common. Within two miles of the main street in Libreville, the Bord de Mer, there were three rallies for high-profile candidates Andre Mba Obame, Zacharie Myboto, and Ali Bongo.

¶3. (U) Bongo's event was, by far, the largest and glitziest, with several thousand supporters around a temporary stage in an open lot. The speakers and performers represented all ages, including young Gabonese rappers and pop music stars, and old-guard politicians such as former ministers and PDG barons Jean Boniface Assele and Marcel-Eloi Chambrier-Rahandi. Popular Minister for Women's Affairs Angelique Ngoma warmed up the crowd that favored women and youth. Taking the stage amid waving "ABO" caps, Bongo rapped a few lines from songs dedicated to him before making a speech that amplified the campaign slogan of "acting together."

¶4. (U) Besides covering Bongo's campaign launch, the government newspaper l'Union, in its August 17 edition, featured articles on several of the weekend's political gatherings, including rallies for Casimir Oye Mba (also

drawing supporters in the thousands) and Zacharie Myboto.

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BONGO RESIGNS; 813,000 VOTERS ON THE ELECTORAL LIST  
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15. (U) On August 14, Ali Bongo stepped down from his cabinet position as Minister of Defense. By doing so, he removed a key talking point from the campaign agenda of his opponents. The defense portfolio is now in the hands of Bongo ally and Minister of the Interior Jean-Francois Ndongou. Minister Ndongou, in cooperation with the electoral commission (la Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome et Permanante) revealed on August 18 that as a result of the revisions to the electoral list, there were over 100,000 new voters added ) for a total of 813,164.

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FOREIGN MINITER TONGUI ON BONGO AND OTHERS  
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16. (C) At a national day ceremony Foreign Minister Paul Tongui told the Ambassador that Bongo and his campaign team were surprised by the turnout for the rally. They had underestimated the demand for free t-shirts and he had given away his own shirt and cap to a young supporter. Asked if he expected such crowds throughout the campaign, Tongui responded that Bongo faced a tough campaign in several provinces. Port Gentil, Gabon's commercial center, in Ogooue-Maritime; Ogooue-Ivindo province; and Woleu-Ntem province (bordering both Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon) will all be difficult, Tongui commented, but Bongo intends to

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campaign in all nine provinces.

17. (C) Asked whether he thought there would be 23 candidates by the end of the campaign, Tongui replied that the formation of alliances or other tactics would not make a difference for Bongo's campaign. Regarding the possibility of a rapprochement between Bongo and former PDG leaders-turned-independent candidates Oye Mba, Mba Obame, and former prime minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong, Tongui said that Bongo had tried to "work things out" with his former political allies but nothing could be done at this point. He added that the relationship with Mba Obame had been deteriorating for about two years.

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FORTY-NINTH ANNIVERSARY OF GABON'S INDEPENDENCE COINCIDES  
WITH CAMAPIGN WEEKEND  
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18. (U) Gabon's 49th independence celebration coincided with the start of the electoral campaign. Interim President Rose Francine Rogombe's speeches for the two major political events highlighted the legacy of democracy, peace, and unity left by the last President Omar Bongo, but also warned the Gabonese of the danger of "artificial tensions" that threaten this legacy during the transition to a new president.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Based on Gabon's previous election campaigns, we expect government activity at the leadership level will be drastically reduced as the election takes center stage. Ali Bongo has the advantage of the largest campaign chest and the nationwide PDG membership for campaign workers. Nonetheless, FM Tongui's concern about Bongo's weak support in several regions is justified. Port Gentil has a PDG mayor but opposition politicians and supporters are strong there. Although Tongui did not elaborate, Woleu-Ntem poses a particular problem for Bongo (a minority Teke) because the province's ethnic majority is Fang and voters may be drawn

to a Fang Candidate (almost one half of the 23 candidates are Fang, including Eyegehe Ndong, Mba Obame, Oye Mba or Mba Abessole). Interim President Rogome's thinly veiled allusion to ethnicity as one of the dangers of "artificial tensions" will likely be echoed in upcoming campaign stops. However, ethnicity will remain an issue as candidates seek to strengthen their support in the less than two weeks that remain before the August 30 vote. END COMMENT.

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